

FEATURE

Couple finds success, joy in spite of blindness

By Darci Smith
Catholic News Service

LANSING, Mich. — Robert and Jennie Mahoney have shared lives filled with joys: He served 18 years in the Michigan Legislature, and together they raised 10 children.

And both are blind.

"You're given one life, and you've got to do the very best you can with it," said Robert Mahoney, 76. "And it's not easy — life is hard. People today want to think that everything can be easy, and you don't have to struggle or fight or work for anything."

"But half the joy in life is making some success out of it," he added in an interview with *The Michigan Catholic*, Detroit archdiocesan newspaper.

Robert's successes prompted him to write his autobiography, *Living Out of Sight*, which he self-published in 1995.

Jennie became visually impaired following a high fever at age 3, and lost the remainder of her eyesight at 11. Robert has been blind in one eye since birth, and lost sight in the other as the result of detached retina suffered in a skiing accident while he was an 11th-grader at Holy Redeemer High School in Detroit.

The two met at the Michigan School for the Blind in Lansing, where the young Jennie Kubinger studied for 10 years, and Robert attended for a year.

She graduated and went on to become the first blind student at Adrian College, majoring in home economics. He earned his high school diploma from Detroit's Northern High School.

In 1941 they married and rented an apartment in Detroit, and became members of St. Raymond Parish. To support his new wife, Robert went door-to-door with the aid of a guide dog selling mops, brooms and brushes made by the blind.

"I always figured that the grace of God was there that really helped us along," he recalled. "We tried to follow our faith, all the teachings."

The young couple started their family in 1944 with the birth of their son, Gary. Three daughters — Roberta, Rosemary and Colleen — and six more sons — Dennis, Joseph, Mark, Michael, Bill and Robert — would follow.

"The first five, I think, were the hard-



CNS/Michigan Catholic

Blindness has not stopped Robert or Jennie Mahoney from enjoying life to the fullest. The couple, from Lansing, Mich., has raised 10 children. Robert also served in the Michigan Legislature for 18 years.

est," said Jennie, now 78. "As the kids got a little bit older they could help a bit, even just running and getting a diaper for you helps."

When the children were young, she recalled putting bells on their shoes to keep track of where the little ones were.

After 12 years in door-to-door sales, doctors told Robert — who was born with the two bad heart valves — that he had to find a new profession.

At a friend's urging, he ran for Democratic precinct delegate and won. His years as a door-to-door salesman paid off in grass-roots connections. In 1954, he ran for the Michigan Legislature and won.

And so he was off to Lansing as Michigan's first blind state representative. While he represented his constituents five days a week in the state capital, Jennie was home raising their brood.

In 1956 the Mahoneys established a mail-order business, Michigan Notary Service, which sold seals, bonds, rubber stamps and other notary needs. Jennie took care of the business.

"When the phone would ring, Jennie'd yell and say, 'You kids be quiet, (it's) the business phone!'" Robert explained.

She'd write down the caller's name and address in Braille, then "she'd get some

material to mail out, type the envelope out and then put a stamp on it and have the kids go to the mailbox," he added.

Michigan Notary Service is still in business today, run by the couple's daughter Colleen.

Robert stayed in the legislature for 18 years, and is best known for introducing

the bill that requires hunter safety classes for young people. To prove that anyone could buy a hunting license, the blind legislator went out and bought one himself. The bill passed the following year.

Faith is central to the Mahoney family, and the couple recalled attending daily Mass and the family praying the rosary together.

"Without that, I don't think we could've made it," Robert said of their faith. "The grace of God was there."

It was his pro-stance on busing and fair housing that eventually "drove him out" of his legislative position in 1972, he said.

"As a man and a Christian, I had to pay more than lip service to my principles and convictions," he wrote in his 1995 book. "It's always much easier to say the things people want to hear and so much harder to tell them what they should hear."

Robert went on to serve as a county commissioner and as a lobbyist, and he eventually settled the family in Lansing, where they are members of St. Gerard Parish.

Now, spend much time listening to books and magazines on tape, attending Mass and playing cards or games.

"Jennie and I play cribbage every day," Robert said. "We play two games, and we have a tournament going all the time."

"It's really vicious," he laughed.

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